ASIAN EFL JOURNAL   The EFL Professional's Written Forum

Refusals among Yemeni EFL Learners: A Study of Negative Pragmatic Transfer and Its Relation to Proficiency

Yasser Alrefaee

English Department, College of Education, Rada'a, Al-Baydha University, Yemen

yasser.alrefaee@gmail.com

Naimah Al-Ghamdi

Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, KSA

naghamdi@iau.edu.sa

Bio-profiles:

Yasser Alrefaee is an assistant lecturer of Linguistics and Translation in Al-Baydha University, Yemen. He has also taught Translation in The National University, Civilization University, Future University, Yemeni Jordanian University, and QAU University, Yemen. His research interests includes ELT, Pragmatics and Translation. He holds MA in TEFL (Pragmatics), Sanaa University, 2014; BA in English, Thamar University, 2008.

Naimah Ahmad Alghamdi is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the English Department, Faculty of Arts, Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University. She is also a member of Tawasoul Center for Dialogue and Research, Rome, Italy. Moreover, she is the editor of IJLLS Journal. She has published three books on literary translation, awarded by SGI-Gulf-Dubai, UAE in (2018) on "Poetic Heart Symposium" for her literary translation.

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between negative pragmatic transfer and language proficiency with reference to the refusal speech acts as realized by Yemeni learners of English as a Foreign Language (henceforth referred to as YLEs). Forty Yemeni learners of English (20 of low proficiency level and 20 of high proficiency level) and 2 baseline groups (20 native

speakers of American English and 20 native speakers of Arabic) participated in this study. The data were collected using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consisted of twelve scenarios employed to elicit refusals, namely, three offers, three suggestions, three requests and three invitations. Collecting these three sets of data made it possible to determine the extent to which YLEs' performance differs from native-speaker performance and whether the differences that exist are traceable to transfer from L1. The TOEFL proficiency test was used to determine the proficiency level of Yemeni learners of English. The findings of the study clearly revealed that there was evidence of negative pragmatic transfer from L1 especially with regard to the overall frequency and order of some semantic formulas used. However, the findings of the study indicated that both Yemeni learner groups showed evidence of pragmatic transfer; low proficient learners showed a greater tendency towards L1 pragmatic norms than their high proficient learners.

Introduction

Pragmatic competence has recently occupied a prominent place in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Increasing attention has been paid to it due to the fact that many learners may have good knowledge of grammar and a wide range of vocabulary but they still fail in real interaction with native speakers (Almansoob, Patil & Alrefaee, 2019). The English as foreign learners (henceforth referred to as EFL) mastery over formal properties of a language does not guarantee the appropriate use of the target language (Hashemian, 2012). Besides mastering language properties, EFL learners must have sociocultural knowledge of L2 in order to use the language appropriately. Lacking this knowledge on the part of L2 learners, even those with good proficiency levels, are expected to restore to their L1 sociocultural rules (pragmatic transfer) that may bring about intercultural misunderstanding and consequently lead to serious consequences.

This pragmatic failure caused by pragmatic transfer is said to be more detrimental than linguistic errors. Nelson, Carson, Al Bata, & El Bakary (2002) reported that "While native speakers often forgive the phonological, syntactic, and lexical errors made by L2 speakers, they are less likely to forgive pragmatic errors. Native speakers typically interpret pragmatic errors negatively as arrogance, impatience, rudeness, and so forth" (p.164).

Negative pragmatic transfer takes place when learners use L1 speech act norms that are inappropriate in the corresponding L2 setting (Alrefaee, Al-Ghamadi & Almansoob; 2019).

The proper contextual use of speech acts represents the criterion by which L2 learners' pragmatic competence is evaluated. For this purpose, in the course of this study, the speech act of refusal is selected to investigate the extent of pragmatic transfer among Yemeni EFL university learners. That is because refusal speech act is considered to be complex and it implies face-threatening acts. Furthermore, both negative and positive faces of the interlocutors are risked and refusal requires a high level of pragmatic competence for L2 speakers to perform successfully. Some researchers have found that L2 learners with high proficiency level showed a greater failure to perform this speech act when interacting in the L2 (Kim & Kwon, 2010, Morkus, 2009 and Morkus, 2018). They found that learners, instead, utilized their L1 pragmatic strategies when realizing refusals which may lead to pragmatic failure. However, other researchers have found that L2 learners with a low proficiency level have shown a tendency toward their L1 (Wannaruk, 2008). Generally, this kind of relationship between pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency is still debatable. The current study is meant to find evidences of pragmatic transfer; it attempts to figure out the relationship between pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency among Yemeni EFL learners.

Statement of the Problem

Communicative competence is commonly recognized by practitioners in the field of language teaching as a major pedagogical goal. Thus, pragmatic instruction has become a necessity and an important component in English as a Second Language or English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) curricula (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). This simply means that EFL/ESL learners should be exposed to the actual use of the target language in order to acquire the pragmatic norms of L2. That is, besides the acquisition of grammatical abilities, EFL learners have to be familiar with the appropriate use of the language within a sociocultural context.

However, Yemeni EFL university learners are left unexposed to the actual use of the target language as the focus in curricula is on promoting learners' grammatical competence. This is summarized in Al-Sanhani's (2007) study in which it was found that pragmatic competence remains marginal in the Yemeni EFL instruction and the emphasis of language teaching lies on promoting learners' grammatical competence.

Thereupon, it is assumed that Yemeni learners of English may resort to their L1 pragmatic norms, which do not necessarily correspond with L2, when interacting in the target language. For example, they would invoke the name of God in the speech act of refusal in order to mitigate the illocutionary force of their refusals and to save the face e.g., "I swear by God that I don't have money." or they would say "I divorce my wife that I don't have money".

Americans are not familiar with these expressions as they are religiously oriented and culture-specific expressions. This kind of pragmatic transfer results in communication breakdown. The pragmatic transfer of Yemeni EFL learners could be attributed to the lack of exposure to the L2 use in social contexts and to their unfamiliarity of the appropriate utterances used in different social contexts.

This study seeks to find out evidences of the negative pragmatic transfer among Yemeni EFL learners as reflected in their performance of the speech act of refusal, and more specifically, it investigates the relationship between YLEs' pragmatic transfer, if any, and their L2 proficiency.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequently used refusal strategies among English native speakers (henceforth referred to as ENSs), Arabic native speakers (henceforth referred to as ANSs) and YLEs.
2. How differently/similarly do Yemeni and Americans respond to refusals?
3. What is the relationship between pragmatic transfer and proficiency?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in many points; initially, its findings substantiating the relationship between pragmatic transfer and L2 learners' proficiency level are expected to yield a better understanding of the developmental aspects of L2 pragmatic competence. Second, identifying the general patterns of pragmatic transfer produced by a group of subjects from Arabic language background could also be helpful to the EFL teachers and curriculum designers. The EFL teachers are hopefully expected to make use of such findings to predict situations in which Yemeni EFL learners are likely to commit some pragmatic errors. In the light of such predictions, EFL teachers will emphasize the use of L2 pragmatic patterns to illuminate situations in which students fail pragmatically whereas curriculum designers would turn to develop curriculum to address these problematic areas.

Finally, the findings of such an empirical study can provide cross-cultural communication experts and those highly involved in teaching and learning English and Arabic as a second/foreign language with solid data to better understand communication patterns and styles in both English and Arabic languages.

Literature Review

Speech Act Theory

The study of speech acts goes back to Austin's (1962) How to do Things with Words, a monograph consisting of the collection of his lectures at Harvard in 1955. In this work, Austin (1962) proposes that some sentences such as "I now pronounce you husband and wife" are used by the speakers to do something. Such sentences are named as performatives by Austin. On the other hand, descriptive sentences such as "New York is a large city" are identified as constatives. The main point behind his work is that "saying something is also doing something. The speech act of refusal, the focus of the present study, falls under the category of expressives according to this taxonomy.

Arabic interlanguage refusal studies

There are few Arabic interlanguage refusal studies if compared with those of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. One important interlanguage Arabic speech act study that looked at refusals is that of Al-Issa (1998), as mentioned by Morkus (2009, p. 58), in which he examined the realization of this speech act by Jordanian EFL learners as well as native speakers of Jordanian Arabic and native speakers of American English. He tries to find out evidences of pragmatic transfer and possible cause of such transfer. He collected his data from Jordanian ESL learners, American and Jordanian native speakers. The researchers have found evidences of pragmatic transfer in terms of frequency and content of semantic formulas. A similar interlanguage study of refusals was conducted by Al-Eryani (2007). He found out that Americans are more direct in their refusal than Arabs.

Another important interlanguage refusal study is that of Morkus (2009) in which he investigated how the speech act of refusal is realized in Egyptian Arabic by intermediate and advanced American learners of Arabic as a foreign language. Results show that there were important differences between the two learner groups and the native speakers of Egyptian Arabic with regard to the frequency of direct and indirect strategies and individual strategy use. Similarly, Abed (2011) tries to investigate evidence of pragmatic transfer among EFL Iraqis in their use of the speech act of refusal. One important finding of this study was that refusals of Iraqi learners of English are different from those of Native Americans and native Iraqi Arabic speakers, though they do share some similarities.

Pragmatic Transfer

Interlanguage transfer is not pragmatic specific; in fact, early transfer studies in second language acquisition were centered largely on linguistic aspects such as grammar, phonology, and lexicon. The advent of pragmatics as a major component of communicative competence called for expanding the scope of interlanguage transfer research to include transfer at the pragmatic level. Currently, the nature of pragmatic transfer and its influence on second language acquisition is a major area of investigation in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) research. Its popularity is based on two well-established assumptions: language learners' comprehension and production of linguistic action.

Pragmatic transfer is defined by Kasper (1992) as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (p. 207). Within this framework, Kasper differentiates between positive pragmatic transfer and negative pragmatic transfer. Positive pragmatic transfer facilitates language acquisition such that "language specific conventions of usage and use are demonstrably non-universal yet shared between L1 and L2" (p. 212). For instance, learners have been shown to successfully transfer their refusal pragmatic patterns and convention into English from Arabic (Al-Issa, 1998 and Abed, 2011), Korean (Kim, 2004 and Kim & Kwon, 2010), Japanese (Beebe et al., 1990), Thai (Wannaruk, 2008) and Persian (Hashemian, 2012). Negative pragmatic transfer, on the other hand, often leads to miscommunication when L1-based pragmatic conventions are "being projected into L2 contexts and differing from the pragmatic perceptions and behaviours of the target community" (Kasper, 1992, p. 213). The focus of this study is mainly on the negative pragmatic transfer that may bring about a pragmatic failure.

Methods

Participants

The investigation of EFL learners' L1 pragmatic transfer should involve the collection of three comparable sets of data: (a) samples of the target language as performed by L2 learners, (b) samples of the target language as performed by native speakers, and (c) samples of the native language as performed by L1 native speakers (Ellis, 1994). It was argued that collecting these three sets of data allows the researcher "to determine to what extent learner performance differs from native-speaker performance and whether the differences are traceable to transfer from the L1" (ibid. p. 162).

Adopting this canonical design, the current study includes 20 English native speakers (ENSs) representing the sample of the target language, 20 Arabic native speakers (ANSs) representing the sample of the native language of L2 learners and 40 Yemeni learners of English (YLE) representing the sample of the target language. The 40YLE participants are divided into two groups based on their proficiency levels as shown below in Figure 3-1 below.

Yemeni Learners of English (YLEs)

The YLE participants, who are the main subjects of this study, were students of English in the Faculty of Education, Sana'a University in the academic year 2018-2019.

The researcher took permission from the department to administer the study instrument and asked the students to participate in the study. They were told about the study and what they were supposed to do. They were notified that they were required to undergo two phases in the course of this study. Phase one is to sit for a proficiency test and the other is to fill in a questionnaire. Sixty students from A and B groups agreed to participate. After taking their consent, they were given a proficiency test, TOEFL, on the first day. Based on their scores, only 40 students were selected to participate in the second phase, 20 students from those who scored above 75 and 20 students from those who scored less than 75. The former group represents the high proficient (HP) learners and the latter represents the low proficient learners. The HP leaner group includes 10 males and 10 females between the ages of 20 and 25 with an average age of 24, whereas the LP learner group consists of 9 males and 11 females between the ages of 19 and 24 with a mean age of 23. All participants of these two groups have been studying English, as their university major for four years. None of them has traveled abroad where English is used as a medium of communication. Their exposure to the language is only through school and college teaching. On the second day, the DCT was administered to the participants.

English Native Speakers (ENSs)

The ENS participants were recruited from the Journalism Department, Ohio University, USA. The participants who were selected randomly are undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 27, consisting of 7 males and 13 females with an average age of 24.

Arabic Native Speakers (ANSs)

The ANS participants were selected randomly from the Arabic department, Education College, Sana'a University in Yemen. All the participants were undergraduate students between

the ages of 19 and 25 with a mean age of 23. This group consisted of 8 males and 12 females. The participants in this group have no knowledge of English culture and language.

Instruments

   To elicit the performance of the speech act under consideration, refusal, from the three group participants, a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was administered. The DCT consists of situational descriptions that specified a social setting. Each situation is clearly followed by a blank space in which the participants are asked to provide the appropriate linguistic form of refusal speech act as though they are the speakers engaging in real-life interaction.

   The DCT utilized in this study was originally used by Beebe et al. (1990). DCT is used by Kim and Kwon (2010) and Genc & Tekyildiz (2009). It included 12 DCT situations and they were classified into four stimulus types that were designed to elicit refusals: three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions as clearly shown in Table 1 above. Many studies investigating L1 pragmatic transfer on refusals have employed the aforementioned four stimulus types (e.g., Kim, 2004; Kim & Kwon, 2010 & Abed, 2011).

Table 1 provides a clear description of the 12 DCTs used in this study.

Table 1. A description of DCT situations

Stimulus Type	Situation	Status
Requests	A friend's request to borrow money	Equal
	A worker asks for an increase in pay from his boss	Higher
	A boss' request from his employee to stay for extra hours to do some work	Lower
Invitations	A friend's invitation for dinner	Equal
	A salesman's invitation to his client, president of an advertising company	Higher
	A senior manager's invitation to his/wife's birthday party	Lower
Offers	An employee's offer to pay for damages sustained to his/her boss's car	Higher
	A friend's part-time job offer	Equal
	A boss' offer for a raise	Lower
Suggestions	An employee's suggestion to change	Higher

	the date of a meeting	
	A friend's suggestion to exercise rather than dieting	Equal
	A boss' suggestion to take memos	Lower

In each of the stimulus type groups, the subjects were required to refuse three different interlocutors: a refusal to the request of a higher status person, a refusal to the request of equal status, and a refusal to the request of a lower status. Such differences in position between the refusee and the refuser are based on the refuser's social status, which incorporates the disparity between their power, distance, and position.

With respect to ANS participants, they were given an Arabic translated version of the DCT. The researchers have translated the DCT into Arabic, a native speaker of Arabic.

Data Collection Procedures

The DCT was given to the three groups of participants: ENSs, ANSs and YLES of both proficiency levels to elicit their performance of the speech act of refusal. Ms. Lindsay Boyle, an Editorial Intern at Cleveland Magazine in the USA, administered the study instrument to the ENSs at Ohio University in America. The researcher ensured that Ms. Boyle understood the data collection protocol. After asking for permission to visit classes, she visited Journalism classes at Ohio University. She requested them to participate in the study and to write their natural responses to the situations given in the DCT as if they would say in natural conversations.

On the other hand, the students at Sana'a University Faculty of Education, Arabic department were asked to fill in the DCTs of Arabic. They were told about the nature of the research and how important their participation is. English classes of 4th level students at Sana'a University, Faculty of Education were kindly invited to participate in an interlanguage pragmatic study. The subjects were given DCTs questionnaire and were instructed orally in the mother tongue in how to conduct DCTs. Moreover, they were given written instructions, emphasizing that they should not give their ideal responses but rather responses that reflected those that they use in everyday interaction. After ensuring that all the participants understood the nature of the task, they were asked to complete DCTs.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected from the three group participants, refusals were coded into semantic formulas. A semantic formula refers to 'a word, phrase or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy; any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question (Cohen, 1996, p. 265). The terms "semantic formula" and "strategy" have been used interchangeably to refer to the same concept.

In coding the refusal data in terms of semantic formulas, the refusal taxonomy developed by Beebe et al. (1990) was used. For example, a respondent refused an invitation to a friend's house for dinner, saying 'I'm sorry; I'm going to a concert on Sunday night. Maybe next time.' This was coded as [expression of regret] [reason] and [alternative]. This classification system has been widely used and adopted to examine refusals among native and non-native speakers in different languages (Morkus, 2009).

For reliable coding, four raters, two Arabic native speakers and two English language teachers, were selected to code the DCTs data independently. The two Arabic coders were teachers of English, Translation Department, Faculty of Languages, Yemeni Jordanian University, whereas the two English coders were master students at Sana'a University.

After codifying refusals, YLEs' refusal semantic formulas were compared with those of ENSs and ANSs in terms of the overall strategy use. To compare the frequency use of the semantic formulas of the four groups, the total number of each semantic formula used by each group in the 12 situations was calculated and was shown in tables. The tables would help compare the overall frequency use of each of the semantic formulas. The statistical process was performed via Excel program.

As for the types of mitigating formulas used by the two language groups, it can be seen that the ways in which refusals are mitigated have a major impact on the overall tone of the refusals. For example, one might refuse directly by using negative willingness, but the refusal effect can be greatly softened by providing various mitigations such as a statement of positive opinion (e.g. I'd love to, but…), a regret (e.g. I'm sorry) or a statement of alternative (e.g. Why don't we get together next Saturday?).

Results and Discussion

The results are presented and discussed into sections. One deals with the overall strategy use and the other discusses the relationship between pragmatic transfer and proficiency.

The Overall Strategy Use

This section presents and compares the YLEs' overall strategy use with that of L1 and L2. The total number of each refusal strategy utilized in the 12 scenarios was calculated for each group.

A total of 24 strategies were found in the data collected from the participants of the four groups. These strategies are distributed to 3 direct strategies, 15 indirect strategies, and 6 adjuncts to refusal as shown in table 2, 3, 5 respectively. The overall frequency use of each refusal strategy used by each group will be analyzed below. A special emphasis was paid to those strategies in which YLEs differ from ENSs in terms of the frequency use and strategies were ordered accordingly. The L1 frequency use of such strategies was examined in order to find out if YLEs' deviation from the target language norm is due to pragmatic transfer from the L1.

Direct strategies

According to Table 2, direct strategies represented 14.75% of all strategies used by four group participants. However, there was a substantial difference with regard to the total number of direct strategies. American participants utilized a lower percentage of direct strategies than Yemenis. Direct strategies accounted for 22.60%, and 14.75% of the overall strategy use for ANSs and ENSs respectively. For YLEs, high proficient (henceforth referred to as HP) learners showed a good level of pragmatic competence as they employed a frequency closer to that of Americans whereas the low proficient (henceforth referred to as LP) learners transferred L1 pragmatic pattern in utilizing more direct strategies in a way similar to native speakers of Arabic.

Figure 1. Overall Frequency Use of Direct, Indirect Strategies and Adjuncts by Group
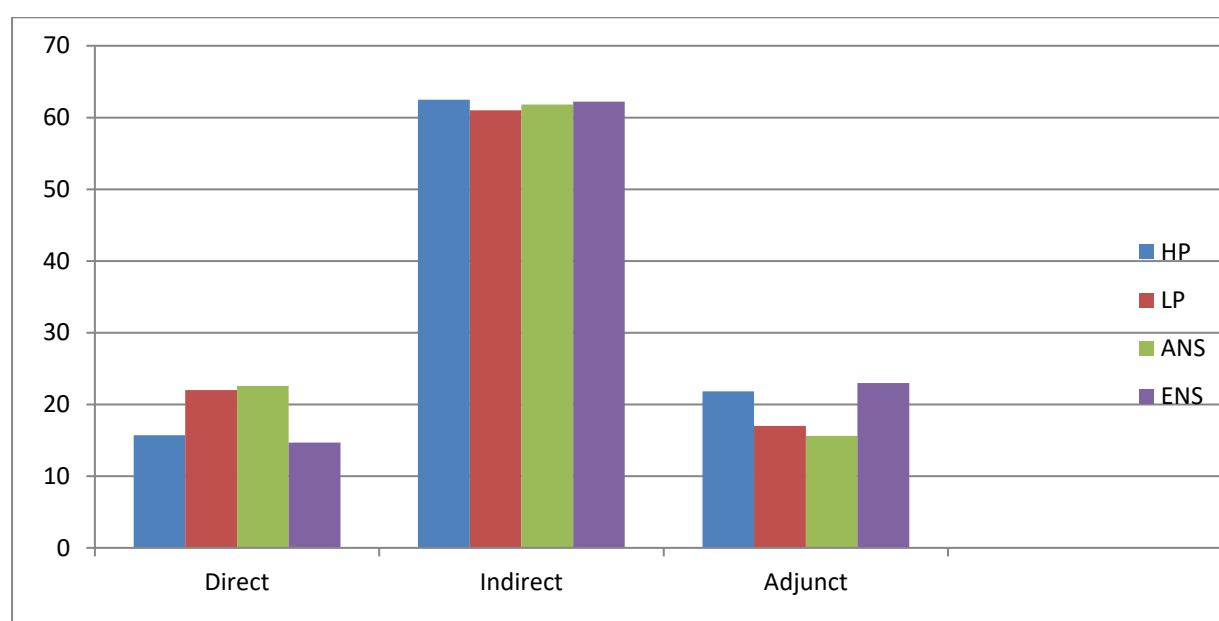
As for the individual direct strategy use, Negative willingness was the most frequently used strategy for the four groups. However, there was a substantial difference in the frequency count. According to Table 2, this strategy occurred 64, 87, 98, and 54 times in the data of HP, LP, ANS, ENS groups respectively. Based on these occurrences, it can be argued that HP learners showed a good level of pragmatic competence employing a frequency closer to ENSs while LP learners transferred L1 pragmatic pattern employing a higher frequency similar to ANSs, providing another example of negative pragmatic transfer.

Table 2: Direct Overall Strategy Use by Group

No	Strategy	YLEs				ANSs		ENSs	
		HP		LP					
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Negative Ability	64	13.0%	87	17.9%	98	19.6%	54	10.9%
2	Flat No	12	2.4%	19	3.9%	14	2.8%	19	3.8%
3	Performative	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%

Flat no was the second most popular direct strategy deployed by the four groups. However, there was also a substantial difference in the frequency use. According to Table 2

above, the ENS participants utilized this strategy more commonly than ANS participants. This strategy accounted for 3.8% and 2.8% of the overall strategy use for ENSs and ENSs respectively. For YLEs, HP learners resembled L1 pragmatic pattern employing this strategy less frequently, whereas LP leaner group showed L2 pragmatic pattern as they utilized this strategy more frequently in a way similar to their ENSs counterparts. This could be attributed to low proficiency level of LP learners as it is easy for them to construct this strategy.

Finally, the least frequently used direct strategy was Performative. It was only found for once in each of the HP learners, LP learners, and ANS data. Table 2 above provides a comprehensive frequency counts and percentages of the overall direct strategy use by each group.

Indirect Strategies

The four groups showed a similar tendency towards the use of more indirect strategies. Of all refusal strategies utilized by the four group participants in this study, indirect strategies represented 62%. There was no substantial difference with regard to the total number of indirect strategies between the group participants. Although the YLEs and ENSs shared most of indirect semantic formulas, they differ substantially in the frequency use of some refusal strategies as shown in Table 3 below.

One major difference between YLEs of both proficiency levels and ENSs was the frequency use of wish strategy. This strategy was commonly used by YLEs and it was ranked the third most popular strategy for both HP and LP learner groups as shown in Table 3. For Americans, this strategy was employed only 8 times and it registered the seventh most frequently used strategy. By looking at ANSs' frequency use of this strategy, it was clearly shown that YLEs' preference for this strategy was transferred from the L1.

Another example where YLEs of both proficiency levels deviated from the L2 pragmatic pattern and resembled L1 was the frequency use of alternative strategy. Just contrary to wish strategy, this strategy was more commonly used by ENSs and less frequently used by YLEs of both proficiency levels. This strategy was ranked third in terms of their use by ENS, occurring 38 times, while it only occurred 11 times in the HP learner group data and 9 times in the LP learner group data. Furthermore, ANSs employed this strategy only 4 times

Table 3: Indirect Overall Strategy Use by Group

No	Strategy	HP		LP		ANSs		ENSs	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Wish	24	4.9%	20	4.1%	26	5.2%	8	1.6%
2.	Alternative	11	2.2%	9	1.8%	4	0.8%	38	7.7%
3.	Regret	84	17.1%	74	15.2%	66	13.2%	83	16.8%
4.	Excuse	129	26.3%	151	31.0%	162	32.4%	121	24.4%
5.	Postponement	11	2.2%	4	0.8%	9	1.8%	6	1.2%
6.	Promise	3	0.6%	4	0.8%	12	2.4%	0	0.0%
7.	Unspecific	0	0.0%	2	0.4%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
8.	Hedging	2	0.4%	4	0.8%	3	0.6%	7	1.4%
9.	Self-Defense	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.4%	2	0.4%
10	Criticism	5	1.0%	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	9	1.8%
11	L Empathy	5	1.0%	4	0.8%	1	0.2%	3	0.6%
12	Off the Hook	10	2.0%	16	3.3%	15	3.0%	13	2.6%
13	Lecturing	5	1.0%	3	0.6%	1	0.2%	3	0.6%
14	Principle	17	3.5%	5	1.0%	6	1.2%	8	1.6%
15	condition	1	0.2%		0.0%	0	0.0%	7	1.4%

The frequency use of regret strategy also provides another example of pragmatic transfer, but only by LP learners. On the other hand, HP learners resembled L2 pattern. They used a higher frequency of this strategy in a way similar to ENSs, whereas, LP learners exhibited a pattern similar to L1 employing this strategy less frequently.

A minor difference in the frequency use was the employment of excuse strategy which was found to be the most frequently used strategy of the three group participants. According to Table 4, LP learners employed a higher frequency closer to L1 whereas the HP learners exhibited almost a similar pattern to L2.

Table 4: Most Frequently Used Indirect Strategies by Group

Ranking	HP	LP	ANSs	ENSs
First	Excuses	Excuses	Excuses	Excuses
Second	Regret	Regret	Regret	Regret

Third	Wish	Wish	Wish	Alternative
Fourth	Principle	Off the hook	Off the hook	Off the hook
Fifth	Alternative	Alternative	Promise	Criticism

As seen above in Table 4, evidence of pragmatic transfer was found in the frequency counts of refusal strategies shared by the four groups. It is worth mentioning that negative pragmatic transfer was also evident with regard to the strategy selection. It is clearly shown that strategies were employed only by Yemenis and never found in the data of Americans and there were other strategies utilized by Americans and never used by Yemenis. For example, although the promise of future acceptance strategy was not employed by ENS participants at all, YLEs of both proficiency levels utilized this strategy. They transferred this strategy from L1. In a reverse pattern, native speakers of English commonly used the strategy of future acceptance, occurring 7 times. Yemeni learners of English, just like their ANS counterparts, never used this strategy. These findings are good evidences of negative pragmatic transfer in terms of strategy selection.

Adjuncts to Refusal

Of all strategies used, adjuncts to refusal represented 24% of the overall strategy use. According to Table 5 below, though adjuncts to refusal were commonly employed by both Yemenis and Americans, there was a substantial difference in the overall strategy use. ENSs have utilized a higher number of adjuncts to refusal than did their ANS counterparts. Results in Table 5 shows that adjuncts to refusal accounted for 23% and 15.6% of the overall strategy use for ENSs and ANSs groups respectively. For Yemeni EFL learners, HP learners showed a good level of pragmatic competence employing a frequency closer to that of ENSs whereas LP showed evidence of negative pragmatic transfer employing a lower frequency similar to that of ANSs.

With respect to the individual overall strategy use, out of six adjuncts employed by participants of this study, the gratitude adjunct strategy was found to be the most popular adjunct to refusals for all the four groups. However, there was a substantial difference with regard to the frequency use. American participants used this strategy more commonly than Arabic speaker participants. According to Table 5 below, while this strategy occurred 59 times in the data of ENSs, it occurred only 26 times in ANS's data. For YLEs, HP learners utilized a higher frequency than ANS, closer to that of ENSs whereas LP learners, on the other hand,

employed a lower percentage of this strategy similar to their ANSs, showing another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. The frequency use occurred 39 times for HP and 20 times for LP learners.

Table 5: Overall Strategy Use of Adjunct by Group

N	Strategy	YLEs				ANSs		ENSs	
		HP		LP					
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Positive Idea	36	7%	25	5%	19	4%	35	7%
2	Empathy	2	0%	2	0%	3	1%	6	1%
3	Pause Filler	24	5%	13	3%	5	1%	14	3%
4	Gratitude	39	8%	26	5%	26	5%	59	12%
5	Invoking the name of God	4	1%	13	3%	25	5%	0	0%
6	Attention	2	0%	4	1%	0	0%	0	0%

The second most popular Adjunct to refusal was the statement of positive feeling for all groups except for ANS group, for which this strategy was the third most frequently used strategy. HP learner group and ENS group used a similar overall percentage accounting for 7.3% and 7.1% respectively and LP and ANS groups accounted for 5.1% and 3.8% of their overall strategy use respectively. Table 5 indicates that HP learners were similar to ENS while LP, as usual, exhibited a frequency similar to that of ANS counterparts.

Invoking the name of God was the second most frequently used strategy for ANS. This strategy seems to be culturally specific, as it was never used by Americans. Both learner groups of participants commonly employed this strategy resembling their ANS participants. This was indicated in Table 6 in which this strategy was found to be the second most popular strategy for ANS; it was the third most frequently used strategy for LP learners and the fourth most popular strategy for HP learners. This is good evidence of negative pragmatic transfer by both Yemeni EFL learner groups.

Table 6: Most Frequently Used Adjuncts by Group

Ranking	HP	LP	ANSs	ENSs
First	Gratitude	Gratitude	Gratitude	Gratitude

Second	Positive idea	Positive idea	Invoking	Positive idea
Third	Pause filler	Invoking	Positive idea	Pause filler
Fourth	Invoking the name of God	Pause filler	Pause filler	Empathy

Pause filler adjunct to refusal was commonly used by native speakers of English and was rarely found in the data of native speakers of Arabic, occurring only 5 times. Interestingly, both learner groups exhibited a pattern similar to ENSs group in the use of this strategy, occurring 13 times for LP leaner group and 24 times for HP learner group.

Evidence of Pragmatic Transfer

With respect to the overall strategy use, the analysis of the data reveals that LP learners showed evidence of negative pragmatic transfer in the overall strategy use of direct strategies and adjuncts to refusal. LP learners utilized more direct strategies and fewer adjuncts to refusal resembling their L1 pragmatic pattern. HP learners showed a good level of pragmatic competence resembling L2 pragmatic patterns in the overall strategy use of direct, indirect and adjuncts to refusal. It can be argued that LP learners' preference for more direct strategies and less adjuncts to refusals is attributed to their low linguistic proficiency. Direct strategies are easily constructed and they do not require a high level of proficiency, unlike adjuncts to refusal which require a good linguistic competence to construct.

This finding is similar to that of Abed (2011) who found that Iraqi native speakers of Arabic use more direct strategies than native speakers of American English. It is also congruent with the finding of Al-Momani (2012) who found that Arabs are more direct than Americans. However, this finding is inconsistent with that of Morkus' (2009) and Jiang (2015) who found that Americans use a higher percentage of direct strategies than Arabic speakers. This also contradicts the findings from the literature that Arabic communication style tends towards verbosity (Al-Issa, 1998 & Al-Shalawi, 1997). Moreover, the finding that Arabs use less adjuncts to refusal than Americans comes in congruence with that of Abed (2011) who found that Americans tend to use more adjuncts than Arabic native speakers do.

Data analysis revealed the YLEs' tendency toward their L1 pragmatic patterns and their deviation from the L2 ones in the frequency count of some refusal strategies. For instance, in the frequency use of wish strategy, YLEs generally followed their native speakers of Arabic pragmatic norm, deviating from that of L2. That is clearly shown in Table 3 which shows their

preference of this strategy which is not commonly used in the L2. This finding is consistent with that of Abed (2011) who found that Iraqi learners of English used a higher frequency of this strategy similar to their native speakers of Arabic.

The frequency count of the statement of regret strategy also provided another good evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. Only LP learners utilized this strategy less frequently resembling L1. It seems that this strategy is commonly preferred by Americans who were found to use this strategy in all equal status relationships. To show their concern, Americans usually initiate their refusals with regrets. A similar finding was provided by Morkus (2009) and Kim and Kwon (2010). However, this finding contradicts the findings of Al-Shalawi (1997) and Abed (2011) who found that Saudis and Iraqis used more expressions of regrets than American participants. This demonstrates that Arabs realize this speech act differently which entails the need for more interlanguage studies investigating the realization of the speech acts in different Arab countries.

Another example of negative pragmatic transfer was evident in the frequency use of the offer of alternative strategy. While this strategy was the third most frequently used strategy for the American group, it was the ninth most popular strategy by ANSs. Both Yemeni leaner groups exhibited a pattern similar to native speakers of Arabic. This finding is very important as it reveals that Americans commonly used this strategy which is used to mitigate in illusionary force of the refusal and to show respect and solidarity. It is important to note that even Yemeni advanced learners of English lack the knowledge of the appropriate use of this speech act. This entails the necessity for the insertion of the pragmatic component into language instruction and future curricula. This finding is consistent with that of Abed (2011) who found that Americans use offer of alternative strategy more commonly than their native Arabic speaker counterparts.

Furthermore, pragmatic transfer was evident in the frequency use of adjuncts. For example, though the gratitude and the positive feeling adjuncts were commonly used by ENSs, Yemeni EFL learners followed L1 pragmatic norms utilizing these adjuncts less frequently.

It is worth mentioning that evidence of pragmatic transfer was also present with regard to the strategy selection. The findings showed that there were some refusal strategies that occurred only in the refusal responses given by the ANS group and were never utilized by the ENS group. For example, the adjunct of invoking the name of God was commonly used by the ANS participants and never found in the data of ENSs. However, YLEs of both proficiency levels have utilized this strategy, providing another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer.

The use of this formula was found to imply and reflect an Arabic cultural-specific norm or value.

Another refusal strategy that was only utilized by ANSs and never found in the data of ENSs is the indirect strategy of promise of future acceptance. YLEs of both proficiency levels utilize this strategy in a way similar to their L1, providing another evidence of negative pragmatic transfer. Transfer of this strategy by both learner groups reveals that this strategy is cultural-specific. Yemenis use this strategy to show respect and politeness to their interlocutors, especially when refusing someone of a higher status. By using this strategy, Yemenis show their willingness to comply if the situation was different and in the future events they will certainly accept.

Interestingly, as Yemenis tended to modify the illocutionary force of their refusal with promise of acceptance, Americans appeared to be more specific than Yemenis. They specify certain conditions under which they would accept requests, offers or invitations. Instead of promising without clearly stating the future context, they specifically mention conditions under which they would accept the request or offer if the situation was different. For example, I would increase your salary if you worked harder (situation 5), I will give you money if I have got the scholarship (situation4). In contrast, Yemenis directly give their promise without mentioning any future condition, for example "I don't have money right now, but I will give you next time" (Situation 4) or "I wish I could come to your wife' party today, but I am very busy, Insallah (God willing) next time" (Situation 1). Yemeni learners of English never utilized condition for future acceptance strategy at all in a way identical to their native speakers of Arabic. This finding refutes the claim of Morkus (2009) who attributed the absence of this strategy to the low proficiency level because, according to him, it is very difficult for low proficient learners to construct conditionals. In this study, the absence of this strategy was found to be related to cultural norms rather than language proficiency because even HP learners who have the ability to construct such complex strategies tended to follow their L1 norms.

As illustrated above, pragmatic transfer was evident in terms of the total number of refusal strategies, frequency count of some refusal strategies and the strategy selection, where some strategies were employed only by one language group. The results of the study also reveal evidence of pragmatic transfer with respect to the distribution of some refusal strategies. For example, though Yemeni EFL learners resemble L2 in the frequency use of negative ability strategy in some situations, they differed in the way this strategy was ordered or distributed in an utterance. Just like native speakers of Arabic, YLEs tended to initiate their refusal with this strategy, especially when refusing someone equal or lower in status as found in situations 1, 3,

209

5, and 12. Americans consider this refusal as offensive and impolite. They started their refusal with gratitude, positive feeling adjuncts to mitigate the illocutionary force before giving the direct strategy.

Another striking evidence of negative pragmatic transfer regarding the order of the refusal strategy is the placement of reason/excuse strategy. Unlike Americans, Yemeni native speakers gave reasons for their refusal right from the beginning like in situation 4 of request and 2 of invitation. Americans initiated their refusal with statement of regret strategy or gratitude adjunct before stating an excuse or giving an explanation. It can be concluded that Americans start with strategies that would soften the illocutionary force to show their unwillingness to refuse if situations were different. To them, it seems impolite to start just with stating reasons. YLEs of both proficiency levels resemble their L1 by using the strategy of excuse right from the beginning of their refusal, providing a good evidence of negative pragmatic transfer.

Furthermore, the order of the gratitude adjuncts showed interesting findings. Americans were found to be interested to start their refusals with this adjunct, especially in situation 7 where the participant was asked to refuse a suggestion from his friend advising him to make exercises to reduce his weight instead of not eating. In contrast, Arabic native speakers never initiated their refusal with this strategy in this situation and rarely utilize it in the other situations.

As demonstrated above, pragmatic transfer was evident in terms of the overall strategy use, frequency and order of refusal strategies. Interestingly enough, it was also evident with regard to the content of some refusal strategies. Though certain strategies like excuses/reasons are widely used by both Yemenis and Americans, the ways they are constructed differ. Yemeni's excuses/reasons were more general and less specific. Yemenis just state the excuses of their inability without specifically mentioning the exact reasons. Americans, on the other hand, give more direct, plain and specific reasons. YLEs transferred this tendency of vague general reasons when interacting in English. That was found when they refuse a colleague's invitation to his wife's party (situation 1) and when refusing a dinner invitation from his senior manager (situation3).

This finding comes in congruence with the findings of that of Al-Issa (1998), Al-Shalawi (1997), Abed (2011) who found that Jordanian, Saudi and Iraqi Arabs give general excuses/ reasons while Americans provide specific excuses. Other interlanguage studies conducted in other languages have also come to such a conclusion; Beebe et. al (1990) in Japanese language, Kim and Kwon (2010) in Korean also found that Americans' reasons are

specific. However, when Yemeni participants were in similar situations that involved refusing an invitation from someone higher in status than their own, their excuses were slightly more concrete than the ones used for refusees in a lower or equal status. Kim & Kwon (2010) observed a very similar finding in their study of Korean refusals.

YLEs of both proficiency levels resembled their L1 in the utilization of the intensifier really just before their excuses, especially in situation 4. It seems that Yemenis are inclined to use this expression when they need to confirm what they have heard from the interlocutors and/or they need some time to think about how they might answer. In addition, due to the fact that this statement is considered informal, Yemenis tend to use 'really' when they are engaged in conversation with someone who is close to them as it appears in situation 4.

The overuse of the honorific title Sir showed also another evidence of pragmatic transfer. YLEs of both proficiency levels started their refusal in situation 3 and 12 with this title when refusing someone higher in status. It seems that Arabic participants use the honorific title 'Sir' to show respect to the interlocutor.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that pragmatic transfer is indeed present in the English used by the Yemeni EFL learners. The analysis of the data reveals that negative pragmatic transfer in the refusal responses given by YLEs was evident in terms of the overall strategy use as well as the frequency, order and content of refusal semantic formulas. Moreover, pragmatic transfer was also evident with regard to strategy selection; while invoking the name of God formula was frequently used by YLEs and native speakers of Arabic, it was never employed by American participants. However, the findings of the study indicate that both Yemeni learner groups showed evidence of pragmatic transfer, low proficient (LP) learners showed a greater tendency towards L1 pragmatic norms than high proficient (HP) learners' counterparts.

Pedagogical Implications

The fact that even the advanced learners of the study lack pragmatic competence has raised a matter for language teaching. The learners' pragmatic competence does not match their linguistic competence. Therefore, it is assumed that language teachers should pay more attention to improving L2 learners' pragmatic competence in the process of teaching. The following are some implications.

Firstly, in order to help the learners to communicate effectively in the L2, they need to acquire the strategies which are used most frequently by native speakers as well as the rules for implementing these strategies. This can be done with the help of the teachers' designing task-based activities which expose learners to ample pragmatic input and elicit learners' appropriate output.

Additionally, the differences in content and order of the semantic formulas suggest that the learners do not have enough socio-cultural knowledge of the target community. Therefore, socio-cultural information should be incorporated into language curricula or textbooks.

References

Abed, A. Q. (2011). Pragmatic Transfer in Iraqi EFL Learners Refusals. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 1*(2), 166-185.

Al-Eryani, A. A. (2007). Refusal strategies by Yemeni EFL learners. *Asian EFL Journal Quarterly, 9(2)*, 19-34.

Al-Issa, A. (1998). Sociopragmatic transfer in the performance of refusals by Jordanian EFL learners: Evidence and motivating factors. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania.

Al-Mansoob, N. T., Patil, K. S., & Alrefaee, Y. (2019). A Cross-cultural Study of the Speech Act of Compliments in American English and Yemeni Arabic. *LANGKAWI Journal, 5(*1), 1-12

Al-Momani, H. (2009). Caught between two cultures: The realization of requests by Jordanian EFL learners. A Ph.D. thesis, School of Graduate Studies and Research, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Alrefaee, Y. Alghamdi, N. Almansoob, N. (2019).A Sociolinguistic Study of the Realization of Refusals among Yemeni EFL Learners. *International Journal of English Linguistics.* 9, (5), 172-185 . doi:10.5539/ijel.v9n6p172

AL-Sanhani, H. (2007). The effect of instruction on developing the pragmatic competence of EFL Yemeni learners. Unpublished Master thesis, Education College, Sana'a University.

Al-Shalawi, H. G. (1997). Refusal Strategies in Saudi and American cultures. Unpublished Master's thesis. Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

Austin, J. L. (1962), *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. P.

Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., &Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. C. Scarcella, E. S. Andersen, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.), *Developing communicative competence in a second language* (pp. 55-73). New York: Newbury House.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2001). Evaluating the empirical evidence: Grounds for instruction in pragmatics. In K. R. Rose & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Pragmatics in language teaching* (pp. 13–32). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, A. D. (1996). Developing the Ability to Perform Speech Acts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18(02), 253. doi:10.1017/s027226310001490x.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Hashemian, M. (2012). Cross-Cultural Differences and Pragmatic Transfer in English and Persian Refusals. *The Journal of Teaching Language Skills (JTLS) .4 (3),* 23-46.

Jiang, L. (2015). An empirical study on pragmatic transfer in refusal speech act produced by Chinese high school EFL learners. *English Language Teaching, 8(7)*, 95–113. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n7p95

Genc, Z. S., & Tekyildiz, O. (2009). Use of refusal strategies by Turkish EFL learners and native speakers of English in urban and rural areas. Asian EFL Journal, 11(3), 299-328

Kasper, G. (1992). Pragmatic transfer. *Second Language Research*, *8*, 203-231.

Kim, K. (2004). Pragmatic Transference in Refusals. *Korbiling 26*, 23-44.

Kim, J. H., & Kwon, E. Y. (2010). Pragmatic Transfer of Refusal: A Comparative Study of Korean and English, 100-136.

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.

Morkus, N. (2009). The Realization of the Speech Act of Refusal in Egyptian Arabic by American Learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language. A Ph.D. thesis, Graduate schools theses and dissertations, University of South Florida.

Morkus, N. (2014). Refusals in Egyptian Arabic and American English. Journal of Pragmatics, 70, 86–107. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.06.001

Morkus, N. (2018). Negative pragmatic transfer and language proficiency: American learners of Arabic. *Language Learning Journal*, pp. 1–25. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1474247

Nelson, G., Carson, J., Al Batal, M., & El Bakary, W. (2002). Cross-cultural pragmatics: strategy use in Egyptian Arabic and American English refusals. *Applied Linguistics*, *23*(2), 163-189.

Takahashi, S. (1996). Pragmatic transferability. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *18,* 189-223.

Takahashi, T., & Beebe, L. M. (1993). Cross-linguistics influence in the speech act of correction. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 138-157). New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, *4*, 91- 112.

Wannaruk, A. (2008). Pragmatic Transfer in Thai EFL Refusals. *RELC Journal*, *39* (3), 318.